

## Article

# Religious Studies as Neoliberal “Triple Mediation”: Toward a Deconstruction of Its “Colonial Difference”

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**Abstract:** This article makes the case, citing the work of David Chidester, Achille Mbembe, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Walter Dignolo, that the academic study of religion (often known as “religious studies” in the Anglophone world, *Religionswissenschaften* or *sciences religieuses* in Continental Europe) remains both historically, and to a large extent contemporaneously, a “colonial” discipline derived from what Michel Foucault termed the structures of “power/knowledge”, imposed on the cognitive and philosophical traditions of non-Western and indigenous peoples. It argues that the “archetype” of rationality taken for granted in much Western scholarship about “religion” amounts to what Chidester terms a “triple mediation” between the imperial domination and colonial classification and administration of subjugated peoples and their symbolical practices and cultural memory—one which, in fact, has been re-inscribed in present day “neoliberal” fantasies of one world “without religion”. Finally, the article proposes a new “deconstructive” reading of theories of religion using post-structuralist instead of Enlightenment methodologies.

**Keywords:** religious studies; Religions wissenschaft; colonialism; post-colonial; neoliberalism; deconstruction; post-structuralism; differend; colonial difference

## 1. Introduction

In his 1971 all-time hit tune “Imagine” Beatles singer John Lennon asked us to envision a world without nationalities, war, and private property. And just about halfway through the song he asked us further to imagine “no religion too”. The dreamy premise of “Imagine”, composed by Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono at the height of the carnage from American military operations in Vietnam, was that religion was one of the perduring sources of human conflict throughout history, a truism that few scholars or ordinary citizens would go to much length to deny. It also played forcefully on the sentiment common in our secular age that if religion, along with these other key divisive factors, were somehow eliminated, the “world” would somehow “live as one”.

The quotidian sentiment behind the vision of a world without religion, which found its most popular expression in the so-called “new atheists” of the 2000s, derives from the radical Enlightenment view that human religiosity is basically an outmoded shibboleth, a childish predilection, that must ultimately give place to the exercise of autonomous human rationality. That sensibility was conveyed in Immanuel Kant’s definition of “Enlightenment”, or *Aufklärung*, as “Ausgang der Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit” (“release of human beings from their self-incurred immaturity”) (Kant 1838, p. 111). While deployed during the late 1700s as an attack on clerical authority and what the *philosophes* of that period referred derogatorily as “priestcraft”, by the middle and latter decades of the nineteenth century the same argument came to serve as a watchword for asserting the cultural and intellectual superiority of the triumphal European colonial powers over the sundry darker-complexioned peoples of the world. As David Chidester, in his masterful genealogy of the field of comparative religions, points out, religiosity throughout the nineteenth century “was a crucial index for imperial thinking about empire” (Chidester 2014, p. 4). Both the familiar division of the world’s

religious “traditions” and the anthropological classification of “primitive” or “indigenous” forms of religion, which are commonplace today, developed out of what Chidester describes as a “triple mediation” between imperial domination, colonial superintendence of the bodies and livelihoods of vanquished peoples, and the cultural memory and symbolic practices of those groups Europeans encountered, and sought to account for, in their intricate and often recondite *alterity*. It was out of this triple mediation that even a fourth category of current analysis that we know as “race”, Chidester implies without enlarging upon such a line of inquiry, was generated (Chidester 2014, p. 254).

At the same time, this method of anatomizing the identities of enthralled populations with the covert aim of neutralizing their political capacities under the pretence of what at the time was called Europe’s “civilizing mission”, together with the eradication of cultural “backwardness” or “savagery”, served an even more encompassing purpose. Europeans considered these populations as striking examples of Kant’s “self-incurred immaturity” and viewed their own brutal treatment of them as a necessary pedagogical intervention that would eventually force them to “grow up”. That discipline would be wielded by the new kind of “moral” Christianity that Kant characterized as “religion within the limits of reason alone”. As social historians have reminded us for a long while, some kind of unitary religious imaginary is always the crucial solvent for eliminating the captious clash of ethnicities that characterize empires. Following Constantine’s conversion Christianity provided a temporary ideological cement for an imperial order that declining military prowess and the juridico-political ideal of *Romanitas* had failed to sustain over the centuries. Three centuries later, Islam, with its cry of *Allahu Akbar* managed to reunify—for approximately a millennium—major portions of the Roman empire that had been shredded because of civil conflicts and barbarian invasions. Enlightenment “rationality”, an invention largely of landed aristocrats in their struggle with absolute monarchs, over time became the new unifying secular “religion” of an expanding, increasingly democratic Europe that soon was to rule over the vast majority of humankind until two violent, internecine “world wars” led to its inexorable unravelling.

It was not Lennon’s cloud castle of “religionless” world peace but the divide-and-conquer strategy of the nineteenth century imperialists who ruthlessly parcelled out the whole of humanity into “enlightened” and “unenlightened” souls, or “advanced” and “backward” races or peoples, in accordance with such carefully contrived constructs as race, intelligence, or “national character”, all the while envisioning for the first time an unprecedented planetary civilization, steeped in the rigorous moral discipline and scientific sophistication of its European masters, that effectively brought about world unity. What we presently refer to as “religious” differences were far less substantive lines of demarcation prior to the age of imperialism. After all, did not the Enlightenment with its dogma of tolerance initially see them as inconsequential for the rational education of the human race? With the complexification of human encounters and human experience, therefore, arising out of imperial expansion the markers of difference became instead the true signifiers of the new *logos* of modernity. This article will explore how such a distinctively modern, Western form of rationality became a Procrustean bed into which both the so-called “world religions” and the varieties of indigenous religious experience were forced to lie by a system of colonial domination that was at its core cultural, cognitive, and epistemological as well as political. It will advance the position, citing a number of ground-breaking contemporary critical theorists, that this Enlightenment model of rationality as applied to what we call “religion” must undergo “deconstruction” via post-structuralist methods of semiotic analysis, if the plausibility of any so-called “science” of religion is to be sustained.

## 2. Religion and the Colonial “Differend”

As African philosopher Achille Mbembe observes in his brilliant analysis of the intimate connection between colonization, capital, and the institution of chattel slavery, colonial governance forced upon the mind of the Enlightenment for the first time a quotidian realization of what Kant in his *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* had propounded about the finite habitation and radical contingency of the categories of human rationality itself. The self-enclosed architecture of “pure reason” that had hypnotized

the “cosmopolitan” community of dedicated European cognoscenti since the Peace of Westphalia and the revolutionary discoveries of Descartes concerning a true *mathesis universalis* founded on the “indubitability” of the *cogito ergo sum*. This Cartesian “turn to the subject”, as various contemporary writers going back to the later Heidegger have dubbed it, was far more than an epistemological innovation. It was the grounding axiom for what would later be known as “Eurocentrism” with all its cognitive and socio-cultural ramifications, which included the specific “world view” justifying colonialism and imperialism. Mbembe writes:

In its avid need for myths through which to justify its power, the Western world considered itself the centre of the earth and the birthplace of reason, universal life, and the truth of humanity. The most “civilized” region of the world, the West alone had invented the “rights of the people”. It alone had succeeded in constituting a civil society of nations understood as a public space of legal reciprocity. It alone was at the origin of the idea that to be human was to possess civil and political rights that allowed individuals to develop private and public powers as citizens of the human race who, as such, were shaped by all that was human. (Mbembe 2017, p. 11)

But the cognitive canon of making all ideas “clear and distinct”, which the Cartesian revolution fabricated, conjured up at the same time a spectre of a parallel universe of people and things on the outside of the new Enlightenment idyll who now appeared threatening and chaotic. The figure of Rousseau’s “noble savage” as a counterfoil to the decadence of the old autocratic order now re-emerged as a menacing *Doppelgänger* of the post-Napoleonic order of bourgeois civility and political rationality. The Age of Reason had discovered how to transform itself, no longer by means of some lordly and intuitive contemplation of the interlocking hierarchies of the cosmos as a “great chain of Being” but through a sheer technology of “pure, practical reason” that succeeded in breaking down and differentiating everything into its most inert and manageable components, leading the English poet William Wordsworth to lament, “we murder to dissect”. Through this process both the human and material world increasingly became zones of *radical indifference*, everywhere heaped up with leftovers and detritus as the by-product of its new theoretically and as well as industrially productive machinery.

It was this *rationalized* productivity of relentless differentiation, fortified with the metaphysical certitude of a sovereign and commandeering cogito, that laid the groundwork for what Walter Mignolo has termed the “colonial difference” or the idea of a civilizational “remainder”. Mbembe himself adds:

The Remainder—the ultimate sign of the dissimilar, of difference and the pure power of the negative—constituted the manifestation of existence as an object. Africa in general and Blackness in particular were presented as accomplished symbols of a vegetative, limited state. The Black Man, a sign in excess of all signs and therefore fundamentally unrepresentable, was the ideal example of this other-being, powerfully possessed by emptiness, for whom the negative had ended up penetrating all moments of existence—the death of the day, destruction and peril, the unnameable night of the world. (Mbembe 2017, p. 11).

Such a non-negotiable and “unrepresentable” remainder is equivalent to what Jean-François Lyotard termed the “*differend*”. For Lyotard, a *differend* is an instance of conflict between parties that cannot be resolved by a common rule of judgment, or “where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim” (Lyotard 1988, p. 9). The voicelessness of the victim came to be inscribed within the syntax of this new commercial and “industrial” apparatus of reason. Or at minimum the “*differend*” must only now speak sotto voce with a lack of certainty that reflects what Lyotard would characterize as the impossibility of joining two heterogeneous genres of discourse, one of which dominates over the other and forces it to interrogate its own way of speaking, even isolating it, perhaps in keeping with Foucault’s own method of historico-linguistic analysis as a kind of “outer darkness”, at best as “madness”, at worst as instinctuality and a thoroughly ignoble form of insensate savagery.

Mbembe’s “Black Man”, therefore, turns out to be far more than a mere racialized example of the modernist *differend*. The same figure serves as a trope for a new semiotic system that both

overclassifies and overdetermines the mysterious “other”. The differentialism of post-Enlightenment colonial logic was from the start non-dialectical, disclosing the night side or hidden face of the European *Aufklärung*. Modernism has always had these two and competing visages, the one tyrannical, which fiercely defends the “transcendental” standpoint, and the other revolutionary, which aims to overcome it in the *Aufhebung* of alterity as a whole. The tyranny of this kind of logic, which has reached its grim consummation in today’s neoliberal planetary order where each one of us, according to Wendy Brown, have become “entrepreneurs of the self”, has its genesis in the failure of the immediate heirs of the eighteenth century *philosophes* to transform the differend into a new kind of cultural or political subjectivity that would have truly made a “concrete universal” out of the abstract, Jacobin slogan of *les droits de l’homme*. Instead modernism triumphed by allowing itself through new administrative architectures of domination, which were derived from purely virtual schemes of distinction and classification, the luxury of *refusing* to name what it did not want to assimilate or incorporate. Modernism has always been, as Mbembe puts it, the “becoming black of the world”. As Alain Badiou reminds us, the heterotopic use of the figure of blackness rests on its *non-dialectical* function within a non-commutative constellation of differential operators. “Black is passive negation; it merely indicates the opposite of its extreme opposite, light” (Badiou 2017, p. 39). The “light” of the Enlightenment, therefore, has all along overridden a “lower”, largely imperceptible spectrum of significations and representations struggling for visibility. But they have been granted perceptibility only to the degree that they do not complete with, or exceed, the coruscating “clarity” of the categories that emanate from the white light of Europe’s own regime of “critical” rationality.

Foremost within this spectrum of representations are those we understand as “religious”. If, as Mbembe tells us, “black” Africa is the differend defining an impossible negotiation between the illuminated white *mentalité* of colonial Europe and the “least of these” struggling for dignity and recognition throughout the invisible *remainder* of the world, then “religion” in its original nineteenth century sense amounts to the differend between Enlightenment reason as a whole and the varieties of culturally embedded forms of self-consciousness that the regimes of “colonial difference” did not allow to be recognized as enjoying any kind of sovereignty or autonomy and which, both conversely and perversely, imposed its own standard brand of European “alterity” on a broad swathe of the world’s diverse populations. For example, in his infamous polemical putdown of the preliterate peoples the British empire the Victorian anthropologist E.B. Tylor cavalierly insisted that all “evidence” shows that “civilized man is not only wiser and more capable than the savage but also better and happier” (Tylor 1871). Civilized humanity was happier, Tylor insisted, because of its commitment to a universalistic, as opposed to a tribal or particularistic, feeling of obligation toward others. In fact, “savage” forms of spirituality egregiously lacked this universalistic ethic. “One great element of religion, the moral element which to us forms its most vital part, is indeed little represented in the religion of the lower races”, Tyler wrote (Tylor 1871, p. 386).

What we should more properly call the *colonial differend*, a space of incommensurability within the rhetoric of the “human sciences” as a whole, effectively relegated the self-articulation of the spiritual positionality of its subjugated cultures to what Tylor referred to as a “defined minimum of religion”, consisting for the most part in belief in spirits (Tylor 1871, p. 384). Tylor came up for a name for this “minimum”—*animism*, which established itself a century and a half ago as a fundamental heuristic construct, which has both directly and indirectly played an outsize role in moulding the basic nomenclature of the study of religion. As Tyler himself averred in 1871, “animism is, in fact, the groundwork of the philosophy of religion, from that of savages up to that of civilized man” (Tylor 1871, p. 385). The “remainder” of race within the same kind of general anthropology Tylor outlined became indistinguishable from the remainder of religion. Both were rhetorically inscribed as miniscule marks of the differential out of which the integral function of a general and all-encompassing “humanistic” theory, a genuine *Geisteswissenschaft*, could be enunciated. Both can be considered part of the same “black” rule of classification that made such grand theory possible in the first place. Both were the crucial, rare elements for the construction of a *cosmopolitan* vision of cultural and spiritual diversity

that would make the later idea of a “neoliberal” political economy at a global level both plausible and viable.

Tylor’s reductive paradigm of animism as the minimal condition for the identification of something vaguely understood as *religion* became the secret sauce for the development throughout the twentieth century of a certain “disciplinary” approach that was later known as religious studies. The approach was both diachronous and synchronous. The synchronous methodology was sustained through a variety of sobriquets—“comparativism”, “phenomenology of religion”, “cross-cultural” study of religion, and so forth. It claimed to be embroiled in some kind of “scientific” endeavour to discover the essential, if not, variable structures of an underlying, albeit unitary, phenomenon that could be described as “religion” in general, perhaps starting from the assumption that there was some epitomic form (e.g., Durkheim’s “totemism”) to be teased out from the welter of empirical observations that would somehow serve as the philosopher’s stone for turning seemingly “irrational” modes of spiritual discourse into what might be construed as a rational and holistic language properly representing the human condition as a whole. Then there was the diachronous way of engaging the problem, which had been suggested, although not really pencilled out in any serious fashion by Tylor.

Most of these procedural maps relying on what David Hume in the eighteenth century had dubbed the “natural history of religion” were mere thought-experiments or speculative ventures, since most of the data about religious beliefs and practices from the past were found almost exclusively in often barely intelligible ancient texts, most of which had been written in languages that European scholars were just beginning to translate. These speculative archetypes frequently were supported by evidence mainly gathered from classicists, or from extrapolations to a more distant past from the consideration of the contemporary beliefs or practices of “backward” people subject to the laws of colonial administration. Toward the end of the nineteenth century Social Darwinism also came to play a significant role in the elaboration of these speculative edifices, insofar as Tylor’s “moral” religiosity was seen as somehow now enshrined as the apex of a complex, yet ineluctable trajectory of “religious evolution” from insensate savagery to Anglican High-Church communion.

### 3. “Inventing” World Religions

As Tomoko Masuzawa emphasizes, “the modern discourse on religion and religions was from the very beginning—that is to say, inherently, if also ironically—a discourse of secularization”. But, more importantly, she notes, “it was clearly a discourse of othering”.

The protocols of “othering” revolved around eliminating the native discourses that came to be called “religious” as illustrations of the differend. If these discourses were to be in any way meaningful and acceptable, they could no longer be coded by their own system of accounting, or within their own inherent semantic system. They had to be “translated” into the language of science, or other “objective” registers of rationality. That was the true “categorical imperative” of the movement that fancied itself eventually as the *science of religion*. Furthermore, the imperative came to be applied to both the “historical” and “structural” modalities of inquiry into the nature of religion. The “scientific” study of religion rested on the cardinal premise that religion was incapable of speaking for itself, as incidentally was the case with the colonized. “My suspicion, naturally”, Masuzawa writes, “is that some deep symmetry and affinity obtain between these two wings of the religion discourse; that they conjointly enable this discourse to do the vital work of churning the stuff of Europe’s ever-expanding epistemic domain, and of forging from that ferment an enormous apparition: the essential identity of the West” (Masuzawa 2005, p. 20).

Edward Said has, of course, recognized this covert agenda of “othering” under the guises of objective scholarship in the project he baptized as “Orientalism” within the arts and letters (Said 1979). And we are well aware about how the “history of religions” until quite recently had been propelled by numerous variations on the Orientalist theme just as the phenomenology of religion had carried through a subtler and more sophisticated strand of Tylor’s project by reducing all religiosity to its most “original” component—Max Müller’s *mana* (Müller 1878), Rudolf Otto’s “numinous” (Otto 1923), or



Gerhard van der Leeuw's "power" (Van der Leeuw 1986). But what if this ongoing effort to achieve some kind of "observer-neutral" stance toward the varieties of religious representation, or even to "recognize" the authentic *self-representations* of subjugated personalities, did not turn out to be the quintessence of the European imperial thrust overall? The fundamental problem of any "theory" of religion—or religions—has always been the so-called "insider/outsider" dichotomy. If what a religious person says about the world as they see and articulate it is not to be taken for granted but must somehow be filtered through a *scientized* lens of critico-theoretical interpretation, does that not then amount to a different kind of colonization—perhaps what we might term *cognitive colonization*? Certainly, that was Franz Fanon's argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 2008), one which mirrored with far more psychoanalytic precision the suggestion that the early American African-American radical and social reformer W.E.B. DuBois had set forth a half century earlier about black people suffering from a "double consciousness" that rendered them incapable of mediating between their own experience and the discursive hegemony of white culture and the internalized gaze of their former slave owners (Dubois 1903). Both DuBois and Fanon recognized that that the oft-cited Marxian dialectic of master and slave laid out in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where recognition by the other—or what text characterizes as the "certainty of self-consciousness"—is finally achieved through labour and struggle at the expense of the ruling class, failed in the case of racial, and by extension "religious", structures of domination.

The Marxist vision of history foresaw both a dialectical, if not an eschatological, overturning of the relationship between "lord" and "bondsmen" in which "the first will be last and the last will be first". Yet both DuBois and Fanon conceived the racialized template of mastery and slavery as more of an inscrutable kind of *aporia*, as a differend. The so-called "politics of recognition", which as a type of contemporary *Marxism lite* can be traced back to Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel and has been a staple of so-called "identity politics" in its sundry formulations over the last century, corresponds in truth to what Glen Sean Coulthard summarizes as a type of crypto-colonial control. The self-representation of the colonized who fight for their own pride of place, or "self-certainty", are only allowed to utilize the sorts of constitutive conceptual tools supplied by the colonizer. Very often, as in the case of the indigenous rights movement involving land claims against private interests as well as the state that in the past seized and stole land from the "first nations" that inhabited vast continents now settled by Westerners, the representational apparatus that guarantees such self-recognition is derived from an alien body of law, religion, and socio-historical taxonomies that were imposed on, and erased the native communitarian sensibilities of, the conquered by the conquerors. The "politics of recognition" (or what Charles Taylor, who seems to have given currency to the expression, has alternatively called "the politics of equal dignity") turns out to be a gargantuan scam that rigs the rules of play in favour of those who already possess the proper rhetorical competence to identify and implement any kind of indigenous "rights" or entitlements (Taylor 1994). The politics of recognition, therefore, becomes a kind of "political theology" that permits no negotiation whatsoever within the semiotic reference frame of those who begin with their own customs, traditions, and world view. As Coulthard remarks, "instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of reciprocity or mutual recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend" (Coulthard 2014, p. 3).

Affirmation of indigeneity thus appears to have come down to a Hobson's choice—acquiesce to, and formalize as a matter of common cultural coinage, the representational system of the colonizer in granting "recognition", or remain mute and *unrecognized*, so far as any kind of reciprocal form of signification is possible. The theme to be highlighted here is that historically the study of religion has inadvertently held out this very Hobson's choice with regard to the narratives and material artefacts of those religious "traditions" it purports to investigate in a seemingly neutral or "disinterested" fashion. In order to "speak for themselves" the bearers and advocates of any kind of autonomous "religiosity" have been compelled to opt out of transposing their own messages into the appropriate *lingua franca*

in which not only the “history of religions” but also what is popularly known as “interreligious dialogue” is routinely insinuated. They are then refused the right to speak except in terms that are automatically disregarded as unintelligible within the operative argot of the field itself. We are left with Lyotard’s *différend*, which in this context means little more than a denial of access to voices from the dark “underworld” of religious consciousness that is not distinctly Graeco-European.

According to Masuzawa, the system of religious differentiation which *Religionswissenschaft* “invented” was not only an instrument of social and political administration. It was also a means of dealing with the paradoxical claims of the contested segments within this differential spectrum to unicity as well as absolute authority. Masuzawa makes the obvious point that there really is no such thing when it comes down to devotion and religious practice as pure “polytheism”, which in itself only becomes meaningful from the administrative perspective. Certain people may follow more than “one true God” but some divinities are more true and authenticated than others, and for practical purposes any kind of spiritual endeavour involves a mobilization of singular energies and loyalties. The penchant of Enlightenment thinkers for detailing a “science” of religion aided nineteenth and twentieth century researchers, according to Masuzawa, in circumventing the paradox of competing religious absolutisms. It was a way of maintaining a certain privileged “theological” position while claiming to have transcended theology through the subterfuge of declaring a secret principle of *e pluribus unum* that was purely “empirical” rather than confessional in nature. That principle was the idea the now familiar construct of religious pluralism.

It is conceivable, however, Masuzawa writes, “that this very threshold of the new discourse of religious pluralism may be bewitched”. (Masuzawa 2005, p. 326) It is bewitched by its own crypto-confessional commitments masquerading as “objective” (i.e., colonial) knowledge *about* religion. Masuzawa opines:

What is at stake here is far more fundamental than the problem of border violations between historical science and theology; rather, it is a question of whether the world religions discourse can be in any way enlisted, and trusted, on the side of historical scholarship. Or, put another way, whether the idea of the diversity of religion is not, instead, the very thing that facilitates the transference and transmutation of a particular absolutism from one context to another—from the overtly exclusivist hegemonic version (Christian supremacist dogmatism) to the openly pluralistic universalist one (world religions pluralism)—and at the same time makes this process of transmutation very hard to identify and nearly impossible to understand. (Masuzawa 2005, p. 327)

The very concept of “world religions”, as well as a “science” of religion, presupposes a special mode of background cognition that often goes unrecognized in the field that is generically known as “religious studies” or the “study of religion”. That cognition, which may, following Husserl, be tagged as “pre-theoretical”, implies the “transcendental” unification of all symbolological aggregates or units of knowledge (*Vorstellungen*, as German philosophy called them) in a format that corresponds within the political realm to the priority of empire. Thus Chidester’s “empire of religion” is largely indistinguishable from the new global *empire of signs* delineating the emergent *neoliberal* imperium of virtualized capital, which in the words of Wendy Brown transmutes *homo politicus* into *homo oeconomicus* (Brown 2015).

Although the term “neoliberal” has acquired a multitude of sometimes confusing meanings since its injection into the bloodstream of academic discourse a quarter century ago, I am employing it here less as a signifier of “free market capitalism”, as it once connoted for the most part but more in the sense developed by Brown and Nancy Fraser, that is, as a “progressive” form of social and cultural hegemony that serves economic the interests of the new global educated elites (Fraser 2018). As I argue, following Fraser, in my forthcoming book *Neoliberalism and Political Theology: From Kant to Identity Politics*, the neoliberal globalist imperium has taken on the so-called “civilizing mission” of European colonialism in the nineteenth century (Raschke 2019). Indeed, modernism and its epistemological progeniture that we know as “postmodernism” consist in this “theoretical” manifestation of the colonial project.

According to Walter Mignolo, “coloniality is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality”. Today’s coloniality relies more on the algorithms of high finance and the “social scientific” imprimaturs of governing granting agencies than gunboats and missionaries. But the effect is for the most part the same. “Hence”, Mignolo comments, “today’s common expression ‘global modernities’ implies ‘global colonialities’ in the precise sense that the colonial matrix of power is shared and disputed by many contenders: if there cannot be modernity without coloniality, there cannot either be global modernities without global colonialities”. (Mignolo 2011, p. 3) The “colonial matrix of power” is the formal limitation of the possibility of what and how something can be represented, especially when what is represented happens to be what traditionally has considered as “unrepresentable”, that is, the one true God or the supreme power of the universe.

#### 4. Neoliberalism and the Empire of Western “Rationality”

But the colonial matrix of power, as Mignolo demonstrates elsewhere in his writings, also defines what might be regarded as equivalent to the European parameters of rationality. In his essay entitled “Philosophy and the Colonial Difference”, As Foucault emphasized, knowledge and power always work together. Mignolo underscores how the dominant rationalistic milieu in which Western science, scholarship, jurisprudence, and any other approaches providing covering theories for phenomena under consideration was built around the historical prestige of Western philosophy, beginning with the Greeks. The categoreal scheme of Western thought—what Derrida in a famous essay dubbed “white mythology” (Derrida 1982)—had its genesis in an alphabetic constellation of writing, according to Mignolo, that gave us the logic of predication and taxonomical precision, a condition that would have been different if “philosophy” has somehow been birthed from ideographical languages such as Chinese, Egyptian, or Nahuatl. It was this categoreal scheme that also provided the justification for political as well as cultural domination that manifested in the historical epoch we know as Western colonialism. Present day theoretical positions, so far as Mignolo is concerned, must become rigorously aware of this presuppositional fabric in which they are profoundly embedded. The cards “are on the table”, Mignolo declares. Indeed, it is the case that we must recognize that Western philosophy and its operative model of “pure reason” happens to be “a regional and historical practice, initiated in Greece and taken up by and in the making of Europe, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. Coupled with religious and economic expansion, philosophy became the yardstick by which other ways of thinking are measured. Perspectives have been changing, and now ‘philosophy’ is located on the edge of the colonial difference” (Mignolo 2003, p. 85).

If any plausible *Religionswissenschaft*, as a derivative of Western philosophical thinking, is thus likewise situated on the “edge” of “colonial difference”, what does that mean for both present and future theoretical perspectives on what we understand as *religiosity* as a whole. How do we theorize without the theoretical dead end that is Lyotard’s “differend”? We cannot necessarily fall back on what Mignolo himself regards as the alternative, namely, what he names the “decolonial option”. The decolonial option is by and large the refusal of “theory” in its broader meaning as well as a kind of “preferential option” to allow the colonized to speak in their own, distinctive voice as a “reciprocal” gesture of inclusion, which at the same time does not demand an “explanation” solely on the terms demanded by the hegemonic discourse of Western—and by extension “colonial”—scientism. Mignolo explains the “decolonial option” as follows: “I argue that one of the defining features of decolonial options is the analytic of the construction, transformation, and sustenance of racism and patriarchy that created the conditions to build and control a structure of knowledge, either grounded on the word of God or the word of Reason and Truth. Such knowledge-construction made it possible to eliminate or marginalize what did not fit into those principles that aspired to build a totality in which everybody would be included but not everybody would also have the right to include. Inclusion is a one-way street and not a reciprocal right. In a world governed by the colonial matrix of power, he who includes and she who is welcomed to be included stand in codified power relations. The locus of enunciation from which inclusion is established is always a locus holding the control of knowledge



and the power of decision across gender and racial lines, across political orientations and economic regulations" (Mignolo 2011, p. xv).

Religious theory thus reverts to its own measure of a theological *Grundrisse*, a kind of "liberation theology" in its own right that calls into question the universal applicability of theory overall, at least in the sense with which most scholars are familiar. The decolonial option, in addition, turns out to be a refusal of any genuine global perspective on the pre-theoretical significance of that dimension of human experience along with the symbolic transactions that mediate it from one culture to another. It is, in effect, both a "negative theology" and a "liberation theology" all wrapped up in one package, one which exposes the inherent limitations of the "study of religion" as we understand it but is incapable of coming to terms with a viable project of mediation that would allow us to signal intelligibly back and forth between the colonial and the de-colonial, or at least go beyond the "imperial" grammar of distinction that has delineated the dominant scholarly argot. When all is said and done, the "decolonial option" as the answer to "colonial difference" simply yields the silence of the differend.

The view of the "religious" factor in the history of civilization as *either* a pre-theoretical placeholder to be filled in exclusively through the locutionary expansionism of Western rationality *or* as a kind of surd that can only be deciphered by those "insiders" for whom for whatever reasons have privileged access to its covert import constitutes a false dichotomy. Certainly "post-colonial" and "decolonial" critiques of the schematisms employed by academic inquiry into the nature of religion over the last two centuries have served well to deprive them of the absolutist stature they once enjoyed. At the same time, the radical secularist idea (as captured in Lennon's song) of a world polity, or world civilizational matrix of common knowledge that has been shorn once and for all of every superstition, localized bigotry, and parochialism, proves itself to be just as much a dangerous fantasy. Such a vision of a planetary secular cosmopolis, as the historian Quinn Slobodian documents in ferocious detail, was heir to the nineteenth century ideal of Europe's "civilizing mission" to the "undeveloped" peoples of the world, and formed the backbone of the new, post-nationalist and post-socialist system of global "governmentality" (as Foucault would call it) based on the expansion of consumer capitalism, a system that has come in recent decades to be denominated as "neoliberalism". (Slobodian 2018) Neoliberalism, which in Slobodian's immortal words has always envisioned a "world of people . . . without a people", has sought to create a post-colonial world order that replaces the "discipline" of the military conqueror and bureaucratic functionary with the pricing mechanism of the global marketplace.

At the level of governance the same neoliberal regime relies on mechanisms of abstraction such as the commodification of desire through advertising, the quantification along with the financialization of all kinds of "human capital" (especially education), and the virtualization of the forms of mutual human recognition through "identity politics" and the proliferating use of social media. It has become what Patrick Deneen terms an "anticulture" masquerading as a configuration of empowering human knowledge (Deneen 2019). This globalized neoliberal template has also absorbed our common sensical view of the religious. "Religion" is no longer what Robert Bellah once defined as a "set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence", one which unconditionally grounds the primordial consciousness of human beings while motivating them to exceptional acts of self-renunciation or fidelity to others (Bellah 1970, p. 21). It becomes simply one more behavioural trait or immaterial "cultural" artefact that can be classified within a socio-historico-political grid of supposedly neutral knowledge that tacitly carries within itself a disposition toward moral judgment. For example, there is scarcely any real distinction between the Victorian savant who dispassionately pronounces the rites of an African bush people "savage" or "degenerate" and a twenty-first century person of letters who considers himself, or herself, "politically correct", or sufficiently "woke", to view the same phenomenon as the product of "misrecognition" through the Eurocentric eyes of incorrigible "whiteness". Both moral judgments are inseparable from the prevailing sentimentality of the current ruling class, whether it be labelled "colonialist" or "neoliberal". In reality, that is real "colonial difference" that really does not matter.

Although this alchemy of neoliberalized signification has its genesis in earlier forms of colonial domination, the pattern persists even among well-known theorists and pedagogues of “religious studies” today. For example, Jeffrey Kripal, a well-known and sometimes controversial scholar, in his recent textbook *Comparing Religions* presses the case that the field of religious studies with its leveraging of ever rarefied taxonomical tools and historicizing rigor serve admirably to relativize the false autarky implied the “religious claims” of indigenous believers and practitioners. It takes the “comparativist” perspective of the present day *panoptical* participant/observer scholar (who ironically is not much different from the nineteenth century missionary eavesdropping on the “savages” around their huts and campfires, who then reports to the colonial overseer what might be taking place in the bush) to flesh out what the multitude of religiously-coded signals within the welter of human culture and behaviour truly signify.

As with Tylor, it comes down to the decoding of these signals from a hierarchized point of view, the Enlightenment one. The code-breaking itself depends on the Wizard of Oz-like genius of the scholar, scrambling with the dials and controls of his or her secret decryption device installed in the tightly guarded conceptual watchtowers of America’s elite research universities. It is the mysterious *maleficae artis* that we know as “comparison”. Kripal writes:

What is comparison anyway? Most simply, comparison is the intellectual act of negotiating sameness and difference in a set of observations. More complexly, this act of negotiating sameness and difference leads to the recognition of patterns and to a subsequent classification of what has been observed. Most complexly, these classifications in turn lead to a theory about the deep underlying structures that produce these particular patterns, that is, to a model of what might lie behind them. There are at least four stages, then, implied in that single word “comparison”: (1) the negotiation of sameness/difference in a set of observations; (2) the identification of patterns in that data set; (3) the construction of a classificatory scheme that organizes these patterns into some meaningful whole; and (4) a theory to explain the patterns one sees. (Kripal et al. 2014, pp. xxxii–xxxiii)

The notion that the “religious”, in its most enigmatic implications, can somehow be scrubbed down to manipulable “datasets” is one great, grey manifestation of what we might call the neoliberal *idée fixe*. Neoliberal epistemology requires the mathematization—or as Bernard Stiegler has described it, the “grammatization”—of every vague representation and perceptual emblems with incalculable symbolic density. The classificatory fanaticism of the colonialists, which applied just as well to native spiritual practices as skull types, does not have to draw its schematism from Anglican high church sacramentalism or a neo-Kantian “metaphysics of morals”. It can just as easily come from the most “cosmopolitan” of cross-cultural and pluralist sensibilities, which ultimately aims to enumerate a surplus of equally valorised fragments of “difference” for the sake of demonstrating their conceptual identity in the sense of “this is what religion truly is”. One can even change from the Victorians the register of rationality, as Kripal does, to be more inclusive and to allow everything from UFO sightings to mental telepathy to the kind of ritual nudity practiced in certain sex rites, so long as in the end it all folds together within the comparativist matrix that he calls a “reflexive re-reading” of myths and collective experiences that a real people in real places and times once held immutable and “sacred”. Whether it is the missionary’s hastily scribbled notebook or the contemporary scholar’s “ethnographic” interventions with digital technology into the life routines of his or her human subject matter, the habit of disembedding the rich, symbolic immediacy and commitment of what we fatuously dub “lived religion” in order to make it intelligible only within a discursive universe in which it can no longer recognize itself continues uninterrupted within the neoliberal academy.

All things considered, therefore, Chidester’s “triple mediation” becomes its own brand of *triple bind*, where we are awkwardly caught between our own anxiety about exploiting or “appropriating” the positionalities of non-European peoples in order to shore up our own advantaged versions, conceding that we have no business engaging in such theoretical ventures in the first place, or deferring to the ultimate “neoliberal” goal of a world without religion, or at least a world where religion only

marginally matters at all. In many respects the “bindedness” of such a mediation is dependent on the protocols of Western scholarship itself with its “white mythological” lens for catching sight of the world. Such a bindedness is intertwined with the false assumption that knowledge itself must be double or triple “blind”. The *knowing* that we regard as “scientific” in such a way that our knowledge of religion is transformed into a “science of religion” (*Religionswissenschaft*) can never become a mere “objective” theme” in the crude sense of the word. Any science, as Edmund Husserl understood, must be ensconced within a medium of self-reflection that discloses its own “transcendental “starting point. It is a position where “we now have neither a science that we accept nor a world that exists for us. Instead of simply existing for us that is, being accepted naturally by us in our experiential believing in its existence the world is for us only something that claims being”. (Husserl 1960, p. 18).

Nevertheless, what we construe as “religious” representations can truly “claim” a reality that can be made meaningful outside the signifying scaffolding of Chidester’s “empire of religion”, Masuzawa’s “invented” historicity, or Mignolo’s “colonial difference” remains a task for which we are just beginning to lay the groundwork, even if we have tentatively written a prolegomenon. The conceptual baseline for such an undertaking would have to make use of the “post-structural” or “deconstructive” linguistic tools at our disposal. I myself sketch out the backdrop for how to proceed in such a manner in my book *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event*. The book takes as its point of departure the semiotics of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, re-envisioning religious studies as “a global analysis of sign-distinctions, sign-functions, sign-dynamics, sign-relations, and full-scale sign-movements and sign-transpositions” (Raschke 2012, p. 33). Such a deconstructive reading of the theory of religion would take us back to Müller’s own forced concession in his Hibbert lectures of 1878 concerning religion that “religion” is nothing more than a stuttering effort not to “comprehend” but to “apprehend the infinite” (Müller 1878, p. 52). But in the meantime we must as Western scholars admit that we find ourselves in a similar predicament. It is one Nietzsche himself described about the same time when imperial European scientism claimed to have reached its zenith: “We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us—indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us”. At the same time, as in Nietzsche’s aphorism, we must discover that the “ocean” on which we find ourselves afloat “does not always roar”. Instead it “lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness”. That is perhaps how the forms of “religion” we study appear to us. “But”, as Nietzsche quips, “hours will come when you will realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 180). It is that realization which makes us realize we require an even bigger imagination than Lennon himself imagined.

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